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The Battle of Iwo Jima: A Necessary Evil?

Abstract

The Battle of Iwo Jima was one of the most horrific battles in U.S. military history. It has generally been accepted as necessary to lead to the final defeat of the Japanese Empire in World War II. Recently, Mark Grimsley and Robert Burrell have proposed that the battle was not necessary to defeat Japan. In the following paper I will debate both sides of the argument and come to a final conclusion regarding whether or not the Battle of Iwo Jima was necessary and justifiable.

The Battle of Iwo Jima: A Necessary Evil?

Luke G. Mueller

The historic invasion of Iwo Jima, a sulfuric island in the Pacific Ocean, cost the United States thousands of casualties. Historian Mark Grimsley, author of "...the Marines had Bypassed Iwo Jima," writes, "One out of every three Marines killed in the entire Pacific War lost his life on Iwo Jima."¹ The average person, even the average historian has accepted the number of casualties as a necessary evil thought to have quickened the defeat of the Japanese Empire during the Second World War. Recently, however, Robert Burrell, author of the article "Breaking the Cycle of Iwo Jima Mythology," and Mark Grimsley have proposed that the invasion was actually unnecessary. They argue that perhaps the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) sent 82,000 Marines, nearly 7,000 of whom would die, to Iwo Jima with no justification. JCS gave plenty of reasons for the invasion at the time, but were those reasons proper justifications for the deaths of thousands of Marines? I will present the reasons for the invasion and attempt to determine the accuracy of the idea that the invasion was unnecessary.

In order to decipher the justifications for attacking Iwo Jima, it is necessary to first understand the overall Pacific strategy implemented by the United States and her allies in World War II. In case of an outbreak of war in the Pacific, most likely against Japan, military experts proposed and revised a plan that would be implemented to bring about victory—War Plan Orange. According to Louis Morton, a professor of History at Dartmouth College and author of *U.S. Army in World War II*, "The first serious examination of plans to resist a Japanese attack came in the summer of 1907."² These plans went through a series of revisions and alterations dependent on international relations. For example, the Joint Board, a consultant committee of Army and Navy personnel, ordered War Plan Orange to be brought under examination once again after Japan's war with China in 1937.³ The final Orange Plan was revised for good in February of 1938 and was officially approved by the Secretary of the Navy on February 26, and by the Secretary of War two days later. This plan would be implemented to bring about the defeat of the Japanese Empire. The official Joint Basic War Plan Orange document states that after mobilizing the Army and Navy and increasing the strength of all military branches, "the Navy could then proceed to take the offensive against Japan. . . initially against the mandated islands and extending progressively westward across

1 Mark Grimsley, "...the Marines Had Bypassed Iwo Jima?," *World War II* 22, no. 8 (December 2007): 91.

2 Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific, Strategy And Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2000), 22.

3 *Ibid.*, 39.

the Pacific.”⁴ In addition to the offensive operations, an economic blockade would benefit the U.S. in securing a victory over Japan. Many people understand this strategy as “island hopping.” A memorandum by the JCS on January 22, 1943 displays the overall Pacific strategy and shows that it remained relatively the same throughout the course of the war. It states: “The ultimate defeat of Japan will be accomplished by . . . blockade . . . bombing . . . and assault.”⁵ Due to the fact that historians have these official documents by the U.S. government that state what War Plan Orange officially was and what it intended to do, it would be very difficult to dispute any of my previous claims regarding War Plan Orange and its origins.

The JCS had numerous motives for invading Iwo Jima. After Pearl Harbor, most military experts believed that an invasion of Japan would be required in order to win the war. According to Brian Hanley, who wrote a rebuttal to Burrell’s article in “The Myth of Iwo Jima: A Rebuttal,” the planning of the invasion of Japan began as early as January 1944.⁶ Obviously the need for a staging base was of great importance to an invasion of Japan. In his review of Burrell’s article, Brian Hanley writes that “Iwo Jima was expected to be used as a staging base for the movement of supplies . . . the evacuation of wounded, and as a supplementary air station for fighter and bomber operations.”⁷ However, Grimsley states that “As a staging area for an invasion of Japan, the island had no value whatsoever. It was far too small, it had no anchorages . . .”⁸ Grimsley provides valid arguments as to why Iwo would have been a poor fit as a staging base, other than being 750 miles to Japan, but because there was no invasion of Japan historians will never know how Iwo would have fared as a staging base. There is one point that is left unspoken. The JCS planned to use Okinawa as a staging, and most likely, launching base for the invasion of Japan. This plan makes perfect sense; being only 350 miles from Japan, in addition to having anchorages and land area available, it was perfectly suited for use as a staging base.⁹ Okinawa is nearly 485 miles square in area larger than Portsmouth, the base that was used as a launching point for the invasion of France in 1944. So, purely based on the size of Okinawa, it is fairly easy to deduce that Okinawa could fulfill all the needs of a staging base without the need of Iwo Jima. Historically speaking, we will never know Iwo’s true value as a staging base due to the fact that the war ended without an invasion of Japan. So historians will never know with any amount of certainty whether Iwo would have been an adequate staging base or not.

4 Joint Basic War Plan Orange, quoted in Morton, *United States Army*, 43.

5 *Ibid.*, 627.

6 Brian Hanley, “The Myth of Iwo Jima: A Rebuttal,” *Journal of Military History* 69, no. 3 (July 2005): 803.

7 Hanley, “The Myth of Iwo Jima,” 803.

8 Grimsley, “. . .the Marines,” 91.

9 *Ibid.*

Iwo Jima's airfields provided the Japanese with a means of interrupting future assaults on or near the Japanese mainland. So, according to the commander of the Marines on Iwo Jima, General Holland Smith, it was necessary to seize Iwo in advance of any invasion into the Japanese mainland. General Smith provides his opinion in an article looking back on the battle for Iwo Jima in *The Saturday Evening Post* November 20, 1948 titled "Iwo Jima Cost Too Much." He states, "Its seizure was a necessary preliminary to any direct assault on Japan and it threatened our occupation of Okinawa, to the northwest, which was part of our grand strategy for closing in on Japan."¹⁰ The seizure of Iwo prior to any assault was necessary due to the two airfields already in service on Iwo; Japan was in the process of constructing a third when the U.S. took the island. Fighter planes and bombers could be launched from here to disrupt landings on Japan or Okinawa. Smith's memorandum suggests this when he wrote, "This island lay almost midway in the air path to Tokyo, and our fliers, on their long return missions to Japan, began to experience enemy air interference from Iwo Jima."¹¹ However, Burrell argues that there was actually very little interference from fighters from Iwo. He states, "2,800 B-24 liberator sorties flew *directly* over Iwo Jima to bomb airfields, and only 9 were shot down . . ."¹² Given the fact that these statistics came from an official report, it seems logical to conclude that they are relatively correct. This evidence suggests that very few planes were being shot down from Iwo-based fighters, which amplifies question whether it was necessary to take Iwo. If there was no enemy interference from Iwo, there was no need to control the island when bypassing it altogether could have sufficed.

In their retrospective account of World War II, *Fleet Admiral King*, Admiral King and Commander Walter Whitehill imply that Iwo served Japan as an aerial lookout station.¹³ Any military member will readily admit that a surprise attack is more likely to be successful than one that is not. So, taking out Iwo as a lookout island seems logical in order to increase the chances of success on Okinawa or Japan. An article in the *Chicago Tribune*, dated February 18, 1945, describes how much the Japanese valued Iwo as a warning station. It states, "Daily bombing raids from the Marianas knocked out the island as a raiding base, but it was still of such value as a warning station that Japanese replacement planes were continually flown

10 General Holland M. Smith and Percy Finch, "Iwo Jima Cost Too Much," *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 20, 1948, 33.

11 Smith and Finch, "Iwo Jima," 33.

12 M. F. Scanlon, Report No. 7 "Iwo Jima," 10 May 1945, 1-22, quoted in Robert S. Burrell, "Breaking the Cycle of Iwo Jima Mythology: A Strategic Study of Operation Detachment," *Journal of Military History* 68, no. 4 (October 2004) 1175.

13 Ernest J. King and Walter M. Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record*, (New York, Da Capo Press, 1976): 596.

in. . . .”¹⁴ Obviously the JCS was privy to this information, so it would suggest that they intended to disable Iwo as a listening post. However, Grimsley points out that other Japanese listening posts continued to provide the Japanese with early warnings of American attacks until the end of the war.¹⁵ The extent of these warnings is not known for sure, but it is reasonable to conclude that as the U.S. island-hopped closer and closer to Japan their strategy became easier and easier to predict.¹⁶ This would render the listening posts almost useless.

One of the primary reasons for the invasion of Iwo Jima, according to Admirals Nimitz and King and Generals Arnold and LeMay, was that it provided the U.S. with a base to launch medium-range bombers on Japan and fighter planes designed to escort the B-29s to Japan from the Marianas islands. Historian John Russ demonstrates the dire need for escorts in his article “VLR!: VII Fighter Command operations from Iwo Jima, April-August 1945.” He writes, “Occasionally the bombers would run into a cloud of as many as 300 Japanese fighters over their target area. . . .”¹⁷ This quote suggests that American fighter escorts could be of great use to the bomber squadrons due to the sheer number of enemy fighters attacking the bombers. Adding fighter escorts to the bomber squadrons could not only protect the bombers, but also inflict additional damage to cities once they reached the Japanese mainland. According to Wilbur Morrison, author of *Above and Beyond: 1941-1945*, Admiral King opposed the invasion of Iwo Jima until General Forest Sherman advised him that it would be of great value as a fighter base.¹⁸ Nearly all historians and the majority of generals and admirals at the time, when studying the necessities of the invasion of Iwo Jima, agree that it would serve the U.S. greatly as a fighter escort base. But Robert Burrell disagrees: “The limited number of fighters in comparison to the nearly one thousand B-29s in the Marianas made the escort of most bombing missions impossible in the face of continuous operations.”¹⁹ Additionally, he declares the P-51s did not have the range to reach Tokyo and back. Burrell appears to be stretching the truth here, in both instances, especially with contrary evidence. Hanley provides such evidence when he states, “The ratio of escort fighters to bombers can be low without compromising operations . . . because bombers flying in formation are much more easily protected than if they are dispersed.”²⁰ While this is not a quote from an Air Force general, it

14 “Tiny Iwo’s Air Fields Make it Strategic Isle: Japs Building Third Plane Strip,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 18, 1945.

15 Grimsley, “. . .the Marines,” 91-92.

16 Hanley, “The Myth of Iwo Jima,” 804.

17 John A. Russ, “VLR!: Fighter Command operations from Iwo Jima,” *Air Power History* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2001):17.

18 Wilbur H. Morrison, *Above and Beyond: 1941-1945*, (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1983): 216.

19 Burrell, “Breaking the Cycle,” 1165.

20 Hanley, “The Myth of Iwo Jima,” 807.

does seem fairly reasonable to assume that the P-51 fighters could protect the bombers reasonably well from any Japanese threat. Hanley goes on to prove his conclusion when he writes, “On the first escort mission, 7 April 1945, P-51s shot down twenty-one enemy aircraft while losing only one of their own.”²¹ The after action reports that historians have access to essentially prove that the fighter planes protected the bombers with ease, which is indicated by the fewer bomber crew casualties after the invasion of Iwo Jima. Burrell’s claim that the P-51s would be ineffective as escorts is naïve when looking at the evidence provided by Hanley.

The emergency-landing theory was, in all likelihood, the greatest justification for the invasion of Iwo Jima, but it was merely a secondary reason to attack the island. The theory states that Iwo, being nearly half way between Tokyo and the Marianas, would serve primarily as a secondary landing zone for planes that may not make it all the way back to the Marianas, where the twentieth bomber group was stationed. According to historian Gordon Rottman, author of *World War II: Pacific Island Guide*, “The first B-29 made an emergency landing on refurbished airfield No. 1 on 4 March.”²² Iwo’s value as an emergency-landing base is overwhelming, as demonstrated by Rottman when he states “By the end of the war 2,251 B-29s made emergency landings on Iwo—24,761 airmen.”²³ This number of emergency landings is widely accepted around the history profession; even Grimsley and Burrell, two historians against the invasion of Iwo, accept this number. However, Grimsley declares, “of the nearly two thousand landings made during the months of May, June, and July 1945, more than 80 percent were for routine refueling.”²⁴ Grimsley goes on to say that other landings were made for training purposes, and the rest were for minor repairs; with this claim he is essentially declaring few bombers were in emergency mode when landing.²⁵ It is preposterous to say nearly all landings were for non-emergency purposes, especially without proper evidence. In a letter to Grimsley regarding his article, John Preston, who was stationed on Iwo during the war, gives a different opinion.

As a combat aircrewman in VPB- 116 flying PB4Y-2 Privateers out of Iwo, I witnessed over eighty B-29s coming in for fuel in early July 1945. They were strung out in a long glittering parade as far as the eye could see. Several passed over the island firing red flares, with crewman bailing out and fighters scrambling to shoot them down. Large tractors with oversized blades and

21 Ibid.

22 Gordon L. Rottman, *World War II Pacific Island Guide: A Geo-Military Study*, (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2002): 426.

23 Ibid.

24 Grimsley, “...the Marines,” 92.

25 Ibid.

protective cabs were stationed along the runway to push any that had crashed off to the side. It was a sight I'll never forget.²⁶

Preston, describing a mere couple of days at Iwo, proves the majority of emergency landings at Iwo were legitimate and not just for routine refueling or training purposes. However, it is not legitimate to believe that each crewman, of each B-29 that made an emergency landing, would have died had Iwo not been there. This is due to air-sea rescue units. For example, "The average rescue rate from November 1944 through February 1945 was around 34 percent."²⁷ This demonstrates that the number of aircrewmembers that many historians suggest were saved by Iwo (24,761) is actually lower, probably around 16,000. This indicates that while the number of men saved by the invasion is lower than previously thought, men saved still outweigh the number of men it cost to take Iwo Jima—nearly 7,000. Because these statistics derive from official military documents, and historians cannot know the exact number, it would be difficult to deny the accuracy of the statistics.

Burrell provides the public with an ulterior motive for the invasion of Iwo Jima: the U.S. invaded Iwo primarily because of an inter-service rivalry among the different branches of the military. While this is not a reason that is cited in official government documents, it is a compelling theory, which holds some credence among those with knowledge of the military services. Burrell notes Admiral Nimitz suggested the invasion of Iwo in addition to Okinawa at a conference in San Francisco in September of 1944. This proposition derived from the Army Air Force, hoping to improve their strategic bombing strategy against Japan, which the seizure of Iwo would undoubtedly benefit.²⁸ In order to fully understand this rivalry, it is necessary to grasp the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their intricacies. JCS, formed at the Arcadia Conference and modeled after the British military, was composed of two senior directors in General Marshall (Army) and Admiral King (Navy) in addition to Admiral Leahy (Navy) and General Arnold (Army Air Force).²⁹ These men would be responsible for the operations of the entire war. The JCS was unable to come to a decision on who was to be the top overall commander in the Pacific—Nimitz or MacArthur. At the insistence of King, the command of the Pacific theatre was split between the two; MacArthur had command of the Southwestern Pacific area, and Nimitz commanded the Pacific Ocean areas.³⁰ The competition between these two men ultimately fueled the invasion of Iwo Jima. With MacArthur following through on his plans to invade the Luzon, Nimitz could not stand idly by

26 John Preston, review of "...the Marines had Bypassed Iwo Jima," by Mark Grimsley, *World War II* 22 no. 8 (December 2007): 91.

27 Burrell, "Breaking the Cycle," 1172.

28 Ibid., 1145.

29 Ibid., 1148.

30 Ibid., 1149.

while MacArthur displayed his prowess. So Nimitz, not to be outdone, suggested the invasion of Okinawa and Iwo Jima to prove to the JCS that he should be the supreme commander in the Pacific. With brand new B-29s coming off the assembly lines the JCS “approved the activation of the Twentieth Air Force under the command of one of their own members, General Arnold, in April 1944.”³¹ This addition increased the level of competition among the Army, Navy, and now the Twentieth Air Force for resources, parts, and men.

Burrell believes one of the primary reasons we invaded Iwo was because General Arnold and many others desperately wanted a separate Air Force. By implementing a bombing campaign against Japan, the Twentieth Air Force could prove that there was a need for an Air Force separate from Army and Navy command. However, in a diary entry, Arnold showed that McArthur and Nimitz opposed a separate Air Force by writing, “MacArthur and Nimitz both want the Twentieth Air Force.”³² Needing to prove that the Air Force was desirable, Arnold became reliant on the Navy seizing islands with airfields, which would allow him places to launch his B-29s. As shown in Germany, the need for fighter escort was great, so “Arnold set his sights on Iwo Jima, which he claimed could provide fighter escorts for B-29s as well as serve as a staging area for heavy bombers.”³³ This desire to become a separate entity fueled the plans to invade Iwo Jima, which is a primary reason as to why Burrell thinks that the inter-service rivalry was the actual purpose for taking Iwo. However, Hanley writes, “by 1944 the establishment of a separate air force appeared an inevitability, as War Department Field Manual 100-20, *Command and Employment of Air Power* (21 July 1943), makes abundantly clear.”³⁴ Additionally Hanley writes that Arnold and LeMay were executing President Roosevelt’s strategy who believed that air power could end the war without requiring an invasion of Japan.³⁵ However, historians could also argue Roosevelt’s strategy was that of War Plan Orange, reliant on the navy and bombing campaigns to essentially win the war. Burrell does not argue this, but I believe War Plan Orange could have fueled the rivalry among the military.

One argument that has been left untouched by most scholars is the fact that the invasion of Iwo was the first time U.S. landed personnel on Japanese soil. According to Rottman, the Japanese had been colonizing the island chain since 1853.³⁶ Okinawa is a much better example of the U.S. threat directed toward

31 Joint Chiefs of Staff 742, “VLR Bombers in the War against Japan,” 6 April 1944, quoted in Burrell, “Breaking the Cycle,” 1151.

32 H.H. Arnold, personal journal entry, 19 April 1945, in Huston, *American Air power Comes of Age*, 246, quoted in Burrell, “Breaking the Cycle,” 1153.

33 Joint War Plans Committee 91/3, “Plan for seizure of the Bonins,” 12 August 1944, quoted in Burrell, “Breaking the Cycle,” 1156.

34 Hanley, “The Myth of Iwo Jima,” 804.

35 *Ibid.*, 805.

36 Rottman, *World War II*, 420.

Japanese soil, but when U.S. Marines landed on Iwo, the Japanese government had to be threatened. While not a main outlying Japanese island, its loss would still be worrisome to Japan. It is easier to understand the situation when put into terms that Americans can understand. An article in the *New York Times*, dated 19 February 1945, describes the situation perfectly: “We can realize what its loss would mean to Japan by imagining a similar assault on Bermuda by a power moving up from the Antilles in such overwhelming strength that it could simultaneously send swarms of carrier planes over Washington and New York.”³⁷ Obviously the loss of Iwo Jima would send messages to the Japanese high command that their wartime situation was being jeopardized.

Official military documents, as well as historians, have provided many reasons as to why the U.S. invaded Iwo Jima. There was no one motive, but rather a set of motivations for the invasion. Of the reasons given in the preceding paragraphs, few are respectable. The emergency-landing theory, to me, presents the greatest overall motive for invading Iwo. This is because, when factoring in the air-sea rescue rates, more aircrew would have been saved than Marines killed. Additionally, Iwo serving as a fighter base to escort bombers over Japan provided JCS with another reason. Although the bombing campaign over Japan would soon knock out the Japanese air force and air defense systems, escorts served a purpose for the bombers for a time. Burrell’s inter-service rivalry theory is another credible theory as to why the U.S. invaded Iwo. However, I do not believe his and Grimsley’s remaining arguments stand up to scrutiny. As Hanley mentions, Burrell does not even comment on the impending invasion of the Japanese mainland. Additionally, destroying Iwo as a lookout station does not provide a strong justification, considering Japan’s other lookout stations and the obvious U.S. strategy. General Smith’s opinion that Iwo would have had to be taken prior to any assault on Japan is debatable as well. Due to the U.S. production capacities, Iwo could have been easily rendered neutral by consistent bombing attacks, making the island useless to the Japanese and destroying any capacity the Japanese garrison had to detect an assault on Japan. Perhaps the best reason is that it simply followed the ideals highlighted in War Plan Orange. Due to the fact that the war ended without an invasion of Japan, Iwo’s full purpose was not fully realized. Frankly, the U.S. invaded Iwo Jima because the JCS believed its seizure could benefit the overall strategy of the U.S. and quicken the defeat of Japan.

While there are many reasons for the decision to invade Iwo Jima, few provided justifications for the deaths of more than 7,000 Marines. The emergency-landing theory is perhaps the most obvious, and in my opinion the best, justification to invade Iwo Jima. Iwo's use as a fighter base is an additional justification, but its

³⁷ “Landing On Iwo Jima,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 19, 1945.

use as an emergency-landing base is the greatest. The idea that the invasion of Iwo followed War Plan Orange provides the least justification because many people would question whether thousands of Marines should have died merely to stick to a strategy of war, especially when other islands could have accomplished the same goal. At the time, this concept was a great reason to invade Iwo, but it is one of the worst justifications in retrospect. Iwo's use as a staging base could have justified the death of many Marines, but because it was never used as such we will never know if this would be a proper justification. Though historians cannot go back in history and replay certain situations like manipulated variables in scientific experiments, given what we are able to know through official government documents and manuscripts, the invasion of Iwo Jima was, in my opinion, certainly justified.

